

Chou, Chuing Prudence

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Reviewed by CHUING PRUDENCE CHOU¹

In the seven years since the publication of the first edition of *Comparative Education Research: Approaches and Methods*, it is remarkable to see how much has stayed the same yet how much has changed in the field of comparative education. The second edition of the book reflects this, with both the expanded and retained content evolving to address developments in the field. The fact that the vast majority of the first edition has been included in the second edition of the book is testament to its enduring value as a foundational reference text in the field. The editors of the book, as well as many of its contributors, are recognised experts in comparative education and are well qualified to undertake such a wide-ranging project, which continues to leave a lasting impression on the field. Mark Bray is the former Director of the UNESCO International Institute for Educational Planning and former Chair of the World Council of Comparative Education Societies (WCCES). Bob Adamson, the second editor, is currently the Head of the Department of International Education and Lifelong Learning and former President of the Comparative Education Society of Hong Kong. Mark Mason, the third editor, is a Professor in the Department of International Education and Lifelong Learning at the Hong Kong Institute of Education. He also serves as Senior Program Specialist in the Curriculum Research and Policy Development of UNESCO. For researchers and students of comparative education, the collaboration between these editors and the contributing authors has resulted in a text that has defined the field, particularly in terms of its contributions to methodology, in a way few other books could.

As mentioned above, the second edition reveals both the extent to which the field of comparative education research has evolved over the seven intervening years, as well as the many key aspects that have remained the same. Among

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the aspects that have changed or intensified in influence over the years, four are particularly worth mentioning. First, while the adoption of neoliberal, free-market economic policies and the subsequent deregulation of education began in the 1980s, its influence in recent years has only continued to increase. Over the last decade, these trends have continued to put pressure on many education systems throughout Europe, North and South America, and Asia. As a result, the increasing gaps between rich and poor on the individual, school, national and international scales are obvious, and they continue to intensify ethnic conflict, cultural disputes and social instability. Second, in this new environment, increasing competitiveness and accountability have become the *raison d'être* for many educational institutions. Accelerating competition between and within schools has run rampant and become the norm with which administrators, educators and students must all comply. Emphasis on benchmarking has become increasingly pervasive in all aspects of education systems. For students, this has been realised through international assessments of student academic achievement, such as the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), as well as standardised testing at the national and subnational levels. For educators and higher education institutes, world-class university rankings and the proliferation of publication indices as quantitative indicators of faculty and university performance, described as the SSCI syndrome, have continued to shape policies at all levels. In addition, the rise of information and computer technology has brought forth a new revolutionary trend in learning. The dominant role of the Internet in students' lives inside and outside the classroom has challenged conventional schools and classrooms in an unprecedented way, so that all educators, teachers and parents are forced to comply with the trend of change.

Researchers in the discipline of comparative education have responded to these changes over the last few years. For example, the World Congress of Comparative Education Societies (WCCES) has evolved accordingly, with themes such as "New Challenges, New Paradigms: Moving Education into the 21st Century" (Chungbuk, Republic of Korea, 2001), "Education and Social Justice" (Havana, Cuba, 2004), "Living Together: Education and Intercultural Dialogue" (Sarajevo, Bosnia and Herzegovina, 2007), "Bordering, Re-Bordering and New Possibilities in Education and Society" (Istanbul, Turkey, 2010), and "New Times, New Voices" (Buenos Aires, Argentina, 2013). The changing thematic emphasis of these high-profile conferences in recent years represents a collaborative effort to respond to the changing demands of comparative education research today. Education has long been a means of addressing inequality,

and education research that aims to empower social groups that have traditionally been marginalised continues to increase in importance to this day. Recognising the global significance of this trend, the present book has been updated accordingly, most notably with the addition of a chapter on comparative approaches for race, class and gender. In responding to this ongoing evolution in comparative education research, the book also includes some subtle but significant changes to its structure and contributing authors.

Despite these significant changes, certain key aspects of the field of comparative education have remained constant over the years. For one, many studies still focus on international comparisons based on national characteristics and individual education systems. The nature of comparative education research still emphasises making comparisons using national data. International assessments of student achievement have continued to reinforce this as one of the dominant themes in the field. Furthermore, understanding what works in education and what does not by making comparisons still requires valid units of comparison. Given this basic tenet of comparative research, references that provide a methodological foundation for research are always in high demand in the field. Solid comparative methodology remains the basis for conducting meaningful research. George Bereday, for example, first introduced his four-step method in *Comparative Method in Education* in 1964, emphasising four steps: description, interpretation, juxtaposition and comparison. Even today, this still remains a foundational reference text in comparative studies. The book under review can be described as being of similar significance, and it is one that other studies will refer to throughout the years.

With a particularly intensive focus on methodology, the book covers a wide range of topics in comparative education research. It contains three major sections, entitled “Directions”, “Units of Comparison” and “Conclusions.” As an introductory section consisting of three chapters, the first of these sections sets the stage for the chapters that follow. It begins with a discussion of actors in comparative education and the purposes of conducting comparative education research. Chapter 2 places the field of comparative education in the broader context of academic research and scholarly enquiry, paying particular attention to the interdisciplinary nature of the field and its close relationships with other fields in social sciences. In Chapter 3, the author elaborates upon quantitative and qualitative approaches to comparative education, each of which has its own distinct methodological orientations and functions in the field.

Contained within the second section of the book are the chapters that make the book uniquely valuable. In contrast to the thematic focus common to many reference texts, each chapter focuses explicitly on a specific unit of

comparison used in comparative education research. The units of comparison considered in the second edition include places, systems, times, race, class, gender, cultures, values, policies, curricula, pedagogical innovations, ways of learning, and educational achievements. The identification of these units of comparison dates back to a three-dimensional analytical framework developed by Bray and Thomas (1995), which categorised the possible units of comparison into “geographic/locational levels,” “nonlocational demographic groups” and “aspects of education and of society” (p. 9). Taking this more holistic understanding of comparative education research as its foundation, the chapters address not only the conventional units of comparison, such as geographic entities and education systems, which have been the focus of research in many prominent studies, but also others that may serve as more relevant units of comparison based on the context. When using time as a unit of comparison, the chapter deals with astronomical time, biological time and geological time, as well as personal time and historical time. In dealing with cross-cultural and comparative research, the book points out some philosophical and methodological aspects for making comparisons. Another chapter focuses on studies of values in different education systems, which must take into account the relevant contextual factors in each society. Comparing education policies between different nations or systems is not uncommon in the global age. The chapter also discusses theoretical and methodological issues by illustrating comparative analyses of education policies.

Another hot issue in the field concerns how education systems design and carry out their curriculum. The authors examine different notions of curricula with a tripartite framework for curriculum comparison. In addition, more and more comparative education research focuses on educational change, reform and innovation internationally. This new trend has enriched the discipline by echoing and interacting with global demands for change. Comparing learning and intentional academic achievement has become the focus of international benchmarking for national competitiveness ranking. The two chapters devoted to this discussion describe and define concepts and terms for undertaking comparative analyses of learning and educational performance nationally and internationally.

The most significant addition to the second edition comes in the form of a new chapter that focuses on race, class and gender as units of comparison. In the new chapter, Jackson provides a refreshingly holistic discussion of studies on race, class and gender in comparative education. In particular, the relation of each demographic variable to the notion of identity (p. 195), the clear distinction between economic, cultural and social capital in determining class (p. 205),

and the inherent limitations of making between-country comparisons based on demographic indicators whose definitions vary from place to place. In the final section, the authors conclude with a discussion of models for comparative education research coupled with insights that one can gain from different comparative approaches and methods in education research.

Regarding the contributions of the book, the diagram of comparative education analyses can serve as one of the most significant milestones in the development of comparative education research methodology since Bereday's work in the 1960s. The book provides many solid methodological approaches and concrete examples, which is especially important given recent changes in the field. Secondly, it is a collaborative work by top experts in the field from around the world, including both researchers and practitioners. Most of the authors are specialists with solid backgrounds in theory as well as hands-on experience in conducting comparative education research. Moreover, the book has continued to change with the field, as evidenced in the new chapter, the structural changes, and the revised data and visuals, which veterans and newcomers alike will find useful and insightful.

Despite the book's rise to prominence as one of the key reference texts in the discipline, there remain a few points that leave room for improvement or expansion in supplementary academic research or in future editions of the book. For example, the order of the units of comparison within each chapter could be improved by reorganising its structure in a more logical way. It could either follow the structure of the cube advanced by Bray and Thomas in 1995 or have a clearer logical order of its own. In addition, many current educational issues, such as educational mentality and ways of learning and instruction, have been shaped by the advancement of new technology and the Internet. For example, it could touch upon issues such as how research methodology and approaches in comparative education could contribute to knowledge-infusion and knowledge-transfer in a world of declining reading. The inclusion of other prominent worldwide issues would be welcome, such as the spread of the SSCI syndrome in higher education among East Asian countries and the escalating value conflicts occurring between different generations when dealing with education policies and social disputes. The book could better serve a wider and more diverse readership if it were to emphasise the increasing role of technology, as in Chapter 12: Comparing Pedagogical Innovations, which is a crucial trend affecting how research must be updated to better fit the new Internet world.

Above all, the second edition of the book will be of great value not only to researchers of comparative education research but also to policymakers and

students who wish to understand the array of methodological approaches available in comparative education research more thoroughly. It can serve as a valuable toolkit for both beginners and experts who wish to engage in advancing the field of comparative research in education into the future.